

October 22, 1998

President Proclaims This as National Character Counts Week What's next? National Irony Week?

This was probably a tougher week than usual at the White House. Imagine the chagrin of the "spin doctors" and speech writers when tasked with the job of writing the President's remarks for National Character Counts Week, observed this year from October 18-24.

The task of observing this week has been on the President's "to do" list since 1994, but this year, it may have been just a bit harder to write — and give — that speech with a straight face. Especially when you look at the law Congress passed creating this commemorative: the resolution specifically defines the core elements of character, which include trustworthiness, respect, and responsibility. According to the organization sponsoring this nationally recognized week, the Josephson Institute of Ethics, a person of character:

- "knows the difference between right and wrong and always tries to do what is right";
- "sets a good example for everyone"; and
- "is someone to look up to and admire."

In other words, a tough act for any man in the President's predicament. But, at this White House, the show must go on. The "spin doctors" just had to use a little ingenuity.

And so they did. In last week's proclamation of National Character Counts Week, the President defines character a tad differently than he has in previous years. First, consider Clinton's earlier statements:

- In Clinton's 1994 proclamation, he emphasized that "adults, children, teachers — all of us must set an example."
- In his 1995 declaration, his definition of character focused on parents' obligations of teaching basic values to their children and their responsibility "to inspire them in moral and ethical standards."

- In 1996, Clinton again declared that National Character Counts Week should embody and promote "certain core ethical values: honesty, respect, responsibility." The 1996 proclamation states that the Clinton Administration has made promotion of these virtues "a top priority," and that "parents must teach their children . . . the difference between right and wrong."
- In 1997, Clinton asked that "all Americans demonstrate in their personal and public lives...the high ethical standards that are essential to good character and to the continued success of our Nation."

By contrast, for 1998, despite the President's numerous past references to "honesty," "social duties," "personal accountability," "trustworthiness," and "core ethical values" in his previous proclamations of National Character Counts Week, none of these attributes was mentioned in the 1998 proclamation. Instead, the President's word magicians pulled a fast one by devoting the bulk of his remarks to extolling the federal government's service organizations, particularly his beloved AmeriCorps, and the mostly paid "volunteers" who participate in them. While no one doubts that such workers are performing a service to the community, there's also no question here that the White House has slyly sidestepped the real issue.

Congress' original resolution noted that, "the character and conduct of our youth reflect the character and conduct of society; therefore, every adult has the responsibility to teach and model the core ethical values ..." Small wonder the president had to do a tap dance this year.

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